

Tuesday, March 31, 2015: new edit

### **My Cuban Crisis.3**

On Monday, Oct. 22, 1962, along with most people in America, I watched President Kennedy on television announcing that the Soviets were installing "offensive" ballistic missiles in Cuba, preparing a capability to attack the US. He said we would blockade Cuba—he called it a "quarantine"—starting Wednesday morning. Any launch of a single missile from Cuba "against any nation in the Western Hemisphere" would lead to "a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

That last bit sounded a little excessive. "Full response?" That meant the SIOP, the plan for general nuclear war. I was caught by that, having written the guidance for that plan eighteen months earlier. Use it, essentially as a first-strike against the Soviet Union in the event someone—Cubans?—launched one missile against anyone? I wondered if the speechwriter had any idea what he was saying.

I went to the phone and called Harry Rowen in the Pentagon. I asked him, "Could you use some help there?"

He said, "Why don't you come on over here—tomorrow." I made a reservation for early the next morning and packed a bag.

*(when leaving <sup>for</sup> a gun to*

When I got to his office late Tuesday afternoon, Harry said to me, "Write a memo on what thirty-eight missiles could do to our strike-back ability." (Thirty-eight was the number—I remember that clearly—I had in my mind that week. I'm not sure, looking at the records now, which estimate it came from. The Soviets planned sites for forty missiles, with twenty reloads; the IRBMs, intermediate-range ballistic missiles, didn't arrive because of the blockade. By that Saturday, they had twenty-four MRBMs, medium-range missiles, operational.)

He gave me a map with the ranges of the missiles, medium-range and intermediate-range, shown as circles on it. Both Washington and Omaha were within range of the MRBMs, some of which were already operational. My first thought was that that meant the command posts in the Washington area and at Offutt Field in Omaha, SAC headquarters could be hit with very short warning time: minutes, essentially no warning. That was really the most significant effect. It meant the Soviets could be confident of decapitation. But I knew what most didn't, even in the Pentagon: that wouldn't spare them from a full, quick retaliation from our massive surviving forces, thanks to delegation. *expand with a sentence or two*

Did the Soviets know that? Did they assume it? To this day, even after glasnost, I've never seen any indication whether they did or didn't. Probably not, any more than we assumed it for them. I know of no hint that we ever told them, though for the purpose of deterring a strike relying on decapitation, we *should* have. [Dr.

Strangelove] We certainly didn't say it publicly, in fact we denied it, to keep from

worrying our own public and our allies. But if we didn't tell them privately—which was the case, so far as I know—perhaps it was to avoid encouraging them to do the same. [They wouldn't have, in 1962, since they didn't have enough missiles for that to make any difference to the outcome. When they had enough to dream of limiting damage, or when they wanted to assure retaliation with a sizeable surviving force—and Brzezinski/Carter and Reagan publicly threatened them with decapitation—they did prepare to delegate, with their Dead Hand/Perimetr system).

This ability to conduct a land-based, no-warning attack on our command centers was not an insignificant effect (as the JCS judged it). But it was nothing new; they could have accomplished this with cruise missiles from submarines. Therefore we had never counted on protecting Washington or Offutt anyway. That was why the Gates study and the Partridge group—both of which I'd participated in-- had designed a system of alternate command posts, including at sea and airborne as well as the undergrounds, and why Eisenhower and Kennedy had delegated authority.

As for the threat to SAC's second-strike ability: Harry told me that bombers had already widely dispersed, including to more than thirty civilian airfields. Thirty-eight missiles meant a big expansion, relatively, of their small strategic force. They were deploying their new solid-fueled ICBMs, the SS-7, perhaps sixty sites were under construction. But only about ten, Harry told me, were operational. (Recent accounts give varying estimates, mostly higher, up to forty, but it's not clear how many were fully operational.)



Along with the four SS-6's at Plesetsk, for what they were worth, that meant that the Soviet first-strike missile force was at least doubling or perhaps expanding far more than that overnight. Yet it still didn't mean that they would escape total devastation if they struck first. A single surviving SAC base would assure that, and well more than one would survive. Aside from our theater forces they would be hit by Polaris missiles and carrier forces, at sea, and surviving Atlas and Titan missiles. Fifty to a hundred missiles didn't remotely give them a disarming first-strike force.

Nor did the soft IRBMs on fixed sites do much for their ability to strike second. The mobile MRBMs, if we really couldn't find all of them, would do more for their retaliatory capability. Of course, if the Soviets were allowed to base missiles on Cuba they could quickly deploy a larger number of these from their current arsenal. A hundred or so IRBMs would make a big difference to their first-strike capability. Or so we calculated then, in days when it was assumed that either side could "accept" tens of millions of deaths, though not hundreds of millions (and knew nothing of nuclear winter, the global effects of smoke).

I wasn't surprised to read, years later when the tapes Kennedy made of the ExComm discussions were transcribed, that McNamara had said at the first ExComm meeting one week earlier much the same as I had: that these missiles didn't affect our security decisively, or even significantly. They "didn't constitute a military problem."

he told the president; only a "domestic political problem". General Maxwell Taylor, who had just become chairman of the JCS, had essentially agreed at that meeting.

The JCS didn't agree. But they were itching to attack Cuba. McNamara's point, and mine, was that they didn't affect us much more (despite the short warning time, which the JCS made much of) than forty more ICBMs in the Soviet Union, which we were expecting in the next few months anyway. A year earlier, CINCSAC had been claiming that the Soviets had already a thousand ICBMs aimed at us. Fifty, a hundred, were not in that class of threat.

After I'd given Harry my judgment on this, he read me into the picture quickly. A group of principals called the ExComm, for "Executive Committee of the National Security Council," had been meeting with the president, or sometimes without him, several times a day for the past week, deciding what to do. Three or four working groups of staffers were supporting them. One, centered in the Pentagon, was coordinating plans for an air attack and invasion, probably a week away as I arrived.

Another under Walt Rostow at the State Department was looking at "long range plans": two weeks from now, or more. (That designation "long range" for a two-week time-span sounds like a joke; but that perspective is what defined this as a "crisis." And for that matter, it was familiar; "crises" came along all the time that felt much like this one to staffers and their bosses: preparation for a major presidential speech, submission of a budget, meetings with allies.)

Harry's boss Paul Nitze, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA), was in charge of a third, planning our response if the Soviet blockaded Berlin if and when we attacked Cuba.

Harry included me in his short-term invasion planning group, and Walt Rostow asked me to participate in his working group as well. As far as I know, I was the only person to be in two of these groups (and the only outside consultant in any of them). I took no part in the Berlin planning, though I was familiar with the work Nitze and ISA had done on planning for Berlin the year before.

I was staying at the Dupont Plaza Hotel, where RAND people always stayed in those days. But we were working almost around the clock that week. Wednesday and Thursday nights I caught some sleep on a leather sofa in Nitze's office. (Two years later, when John McNaughton had replaced Nitze in that position and that office, I was his Special Assistant, with a cubby-hole office the size of a large closet just outside his. My first day on that job was our first bombing raid against North Vietnam, after the supposed attack on our destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf. I spent part of that night on that same sofa again.)

[TO COME: Wednesday morning, while I was reading myself into the problem, the ExComm was waiting for the Soviet reaction to the blockade, which went into effect that morning. K warnings. World on edge. . Russell to K and JFK. World expects K to resist; I don't. Or if he's attacked, to launch FS: I know, impossible.



Question on my mind: why had K done this? Improve balance: for Berlin? (my speeches? Oh dear. Horelick and Rush). Neither I nor anyone pays any attention to K's claims of defending Cuba, then or later. (Earlier in 1961: 2<sup>nd</sup> fleet plans. Guantanamo.) (I know nothing of Mongoose, nor does much of ExComm: so their discussion of why is irrelevant. Yet JFK himself seems to be puzzled: **could it be, he couldn't believe that K cared that much about Cuba?** Had K ever really indicated that to him? Despite assurances that K was defending Cuba? JFK didn't say, "No need." And he knew there was need. Yet he did consider assurance earlier, in August; and to Gromyko (surprisingly: apparently SU buildup gave him fear that K would react on Berlin. Even so, dom pol encouraged him to ready plans and exercise vs. Ortsac. And PSALM had kept him from knowledge a week or two earlier; assurances kept him and Rusk and Bundy (who knew of Mongoose) from pushing U-2 against SAMs. (He believed it unlikely they would find anything; and might get shot down).

What I learned about secrecy, beyond what I already knew about SI and what I learned in Pentagon two years later about clearances like PSALM: Mongoose didn't become known to me despite two years under Lansdale.

Ships approaching; Sub first? "Anything but that." McNamara: signaling. (Anderson had asked for permission to attack). We're signaling" Moscow told. Word that ships have "blinked." (K has backed down from threats; Russell thanks). Actually, we learn later, intelligence on turnaround night before. McNamara furious, chews out Anderson. Confrontation between Anderson and McNamara in Flag Plot

(on sub-tracking!) Insubordination (Later: McNamara wants to fire LeMay and Anderson; forced to choose, he chooses Anderson (cover boy on Time).]

In Rostow's working group on Thursday morning, over a dozen people were sitting around a long table at the State Department, reading the daily reports from CIA on progress of the construction of the missiles and air defenses in Cuba; reports from the Pentagon on events on the blockade line; requests for information from the ExComm; and cables from embassies around the world on reactions to the crisis.

I found myself reading two cables that were almost identical, word for word, to two game messages in the Berlin simulation game a year earlier. As in that game, students were now protesting our actions at the Free University in Berlin, and in the second report, large crowds were rioting around the American Embassy in Delhi. As Walt Rostow was passing behind my chair, I turned to him and handed him the cables. He read them quickly. I said, "This shows how realistic the Berlin game was." He handed them back and said, "Or how unrealistic this is." One of his better lines.

We rarely saw, in the working groups, any cabinet-level members of the ExComm, who were meeting almost continuously at the White House or State Department. Once, on Saturday morning, Douglas Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury, dropped into the Rostow group during a break in the ExComm meetings. He didn't know me, but



at one point, looking in my direction, he asked, "What is it we're offering? We've got to have something to offer him, to get out."

2 I looked him in the eye and burst out, "We're offering not to hit his goddamn  
missiles!" He looked back at me incredulously, snorted, and turned away.

It was wildly impudent of me—though no rank was being observed in the working groups, or, as it turned out, in the ExComm—and provocative, not really my style. I'm not proud of that memory. What's worse, I have to say that it did really reflect my expectations about how the crisis would come out, or ought to.

I was thinking all week-- from Wednesday on, when the Soviets didn't choose to challenge the blockade--that Khrushchev *had* to back down without any real concession on our part. He was looking down the barrel of US invasion forces that were fully primed to go on the following Monday or Tuesday, if not earlier. We had him outgunned at every level in the Caribbean: in the air, at sea, on the ground, in conventional weapons. And none of us, that I knew of, imagined that Khrushchev would order any launch of the nuclear missiles he was deploying, under any circumstances whatever. It would mean destruction of the Soviet Union.

That conventional superiority was reversed in Europe, in Berlin or Turkey, or NATO as a whole. But our strategic nuclear superiority was so enormous, I couldn't believe he would really challenge it there, either. Even if he did respond with a non-

nuclear attack on our missiles in Turkey—which I doubted—and we responded to that, I didn't think we couldn't provoke him to initiate nuclear war. I suspected that Dillon hadn't really absorbed, if he knew it at all, how much of a mirage the notion of Soviet superiority—or even parity-- that we had all feared in the Fifties had turned out to be. (I was right about that, it turned out; Nitze gave a lesson to Dillon on this during the crisis).

It was precisely to repair that extreme strategic nuclear imbalance, I presumed, that Khrushchev had undertaken what seemed to be this desperate measure. He had over-reached. It might indeed have been a preparation to bargain over Berlin on more equal terms, or even to make new threats, and that was worth batting back, though I wouldn't have thought it was essential to do so. Even if we had accepted it, it wouldn't have changed significantly the risks for him of confronting us over Berlin

That was pretty much what Nitze thought, and Harry; and for that matter, the JCS. The difference was that the JCS *wanted* to attack Cuba, and I certainly didn't, and didn't think it was needed to get the missiles out. For that matter, as I say, I didn't think it was essential to get them out, but I could understand the president's determination to get them out of there, even at some risk of nuclear war, which I thought was extremely small. (I was wrong about the probability, it was much larger than I thought. And in retrospect, I was profoundly wrong—along with all my colleagues—to be accepting any avoidable risk whatever of thermonuclear war, under these circumstances, or any others.)

The deployment obviously did confront him with an domestic political problem, after he had publicly rejected Republican claims that missiles had arrived or were likely , and along with that had given the Soviets explicit notice that “gravest issues” would arise if missiles did appear. Word Tuesday morning that the missiles were there threatened to make a fool of him for believing their assurances and for their dismissal of his warnings. If he had failed to act on his threats, the Republicans would charge, compellingly, that he had been both gullible and a bluffer, a weakling, humiliating the United States as well as himself.

[no choice”]

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RFK: You have been...you would have been impeached.

JFK: Well, that’s what I think. I would have been impeached. They would have moved to impeach. I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t move to impeach right after this election, on the grounds that I said, and didn’t do it, and I let...

[Listening In: The Secret White House Recordings of John F. Kennedy: at the end of 6:30 meeting in White House after the president signed the blockade declaration on October 23, 1962.]

[No choice?.]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compare to Richard Clarke statement: “I would have been fired before I got back to my office,” as to why he didn’t tell Congress the truth about GWB and Iraq in 2002.]



At that time, I hadn't yet come to recognize just how decisive domestic politics were in the calculations of presidents as they addressed foreign policy. (I learned that later studying the decision-making of five presidents in Vietnam).. But the prediction that JFK would face impeachment <sup>he</sup> had "done nothing" (not even blockade) in response to missiles was not an extreme judgment, an exaggeration for purposes of self-justification. Any president in his position would have feared that, and—as I now see it-- would, like him, have acted to avert that "by any means necessary," to the point of risking nuclear war.<sup>2</sup>

But the *external* politics of this situation seemed enough to explain to me what Kennedy was doing so far in this crisis. If he had backed down from his own warnings in the face of this provocative (though legal) Soviet move, I shared the view (with, it turned out, nearly all the ExComm) that our allies in Europe would have been impressed both by Khrushchev's boldness and Kennedy's timidity. They would fear that Khrushchev was not likely in the future to believe Kennedy's warnings or threats and that the Soviet leader was not wrong about this. Our allies would be less willing to commit themselves to threats—with respect to Berlin--that Kennedy was likely to back down from and that Khrushchev was not. US leadership

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<sup>2</sup> That wasn't clear to me then, so I didn't face the question, as I now do: could that prospect *justify* that gamble? I repeat: I now believe that nearly all heads of state would act as Kennedy did (and in fact, as we'll see, most of them far more dangerously), as if their answer to that was "yes." No need, perhaps, for me to say outright how I now regard that choice, The point is that I do predict it, which is why the prospects for human survival seem to me dim.

of the NATO alliance would greatly erode (perhaps in favor of France, a prospect that would not trouble de Gaulle), perhaps NATO itself would effectively dissolve.

So though the blockade was an act of war, illegal in peacetime—Kennedy had chosen the word “quarantine” precisely not to admit an analogy to the Soviets’ blockade of Berlin in 1948, which we had always described as illegal—and had some risk of violent conflict, I could agree that it was important for Kennedy to show boldness not only for domestic reasons but for real alliance considerations.

[QUOTE: MCN on the commitments; Sorensen: if we had believed... JFK: I should have said... (hsr had considered whether or not, as did the Pres.)

I took the defense of Berlin—hence, US “credibility”—very seriously. I wasn’t in favor of invading Cuba, or attacking the missiles, nor did I think it would come to that. But even if we did either, I didn’t believe Khrushchev could afford to expand the conflict. Believing there was negligible (sic) risk of nuclear war, I accepted the risk of possible armed conflict in the Caribbean.

[QUOTE: THURSDAY MORNING: Lippmann column.]

That Thursday afternoon, Rostow took me with him from the State Department back to the Pentagon, where he was to meet with a CIA specialist on Cuba. He was interested in expanding the blockade to cover “POL”—oil and other petroleum products. How long would Cuban supplies of oil last, he wanted to know, before their economy ground to a halt? Six weeks, he was told.

He was excited by that: more, it seemed to me, than was justified. He said it would mean “a ticking clock” for Cuba. Back at the working group, I wrote a critical memo to him. [ON WEB] An alarm, I said, that rang after six weeks didn’t seem to be related to the time-scale we were facing. All the missiles were expected to be operational within days, and the other working group I was on contemplated an invasion by the following Tuesday.

Something I learned later from Carl Kaysen was that Rostow, in wartime, had a recurrent focus on stopping the flow of oil to an adversary. In World War II, he had been one of a number of economists in London headquarters (Kaysen was another) recommending targets for our strategic bombing, with the objective of wrecking German war production. Rostow had felt ever since then that “the great missed opportunity of the war” had been a failure to concentrate bombing on German oil refining and storage.

Later during Vietnam war, four years after the Missile Crisis, Rostow pressed successfully in 1966—a year into the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam, which had failed to show much effect on the battlefield—for a major attack on oil targets near Hanoi,. He predicted it would be decisive in ending the North Vietnamese effort. It wasn’t. The attacks had little effect at all; the North Vietnamese had dispersed their supplies by that time. What I heard from Rostow that Thursday in 1962 was part of his career obsession with cutting off what



General Jack D. Ripper of "Dr. Strangelove" would have described as an enemy's vital fluids.

Moreover, I said in the memo to Rostow, what we had heard of the ExComm meetings that morning, which had led to a message to Khrushchev from JFK, indicated that while we were demanding that work on the missiles be stopped and the missiles subsequently removed, no deadline was being set. We needed, I argued, to put a time limit on the process explicitly if we wanted the Soviets to move out: something a lot shorter than six weeks, more like days. I was in favor of a short-term ultimatum. [QUOTE: and place on web.]

The JFK transcripts later showed that CIA Director John McCone, , a Republican hawk on the ExComm, was making the same recommendation the next morning, and Bobby Kennedy actually delivered a 48-hour ultimatum<sup>?</sup> to Ambassador Dobrynin the following night. I myself didn't think an ultimatum would need to be carried out. Unlike both Kennedy brothers Saturday night, I didn't think it would fail.

I have to admit that I don't recall spending any time thinking about what to do if it were challenged. At thirty-one, I was over-confident that a leader who was out-gunned would back down under threat. And—looking ahead-- that seemed to be

confirmed by Khrushchev's announcement three days later, Sunday morning, that he would withdraw the missiles.<sup>3</sup>

Friday evening I read the long, six-part telegram from Khrushchev that showed a very sober appreciation of the unacceptability of nuclear war between our two countries, and seemed to offer that he would remove the missiles from Cuba on the basis of nothing more than a no-invasion pledge by Kennedy. That was more or less what I had expected. That night I went back to the hotel to sleep, for the first time in three days. Like most others, I thought the crisis was about to end. I saw no problem for Kennedy to accept this proposal.

As far as I knew, for us to pledge not to invade Cuba was no concession by the US at all, since we had, I presumed, no intention of invading Cuba except for the presence of the missiles. It was, I supposed, a meaningless, face-saving "demand" that Khrushchev was including to cover the fact that he was retreating without having won anything at all by his adventure.

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<sup>3</sup> I wasn't the only one who drew wrong conclusions in 1962 about his reasons for doing that (see the next chapter). A number of my elders, Rostow and several on the ExComm—McNamara, Bundy, Johnson, Taylor, among others—applied a mistaken lesson from that supposedly successful threat three years later to Ho Chi Minh. Starting with a secret warning to him in June, 1964, it led them to bomb Vietnam for the next eleven years.  
QUOTE JFK to Schlesinger

But the next morning, what seemed to be a totally contradictory message arrived, in the clear, demanding the withdrawal of our IRBMs (or, officially, NATO's IRBMs) in Turkey as well as the no-invasion pledge.

I saw this as just a last-minute, desperate attempt at haggling by Khrushchev—reflecting the Lippman suggestion of this deal on Thursday morning, regarded contemptuously by all the working group members I was dealing with as obviously unacceptable. The very personal message of the day before seemed to me to show Khrushchev's realistic appreciation of the intolerable position he was in.

I saw no need to make that alliance-busting trade of missiles. Nor did almost any member of the ExComm. The word filtered down to us—confirmed by the transcripts of the discussion years later—that almost every member had strongly urged the president against it. That included—it later came out—the president's two most trusted personal advisors: RFK and O'Donnell, who wrote a joint memo to JFK urging him not to take this seriously.

And no indication came to us at the Pentagon that that proposal was delaying our preparations for a US attack two days away. On the contrary. President Kennedy had been convinced since Wednesday, Oct. 17 that if he had to attack the missiles in Cuba, the Soviets would almost surely retaliate by attacking our missiles in Turkey. (Gen. LeMay had disagreed. [QUOTE: LeMay and JFK later] This was the only occasion I can think of where I agreed with LeMay: not with his certainty, but in terms of probability. But unlike



him, I wasn't interested in promoting an attack, and I certainly disagreed with the next judgment he expressed: QUOTE]

With the target date for an attack approaching on Saturday, October 27, that afternoon Harry Rowen was asked by Secretary McNamara for the ExComm to lay out alternative options for a U.S. response to a Soviet non-nuclear attack on the U.S. missiles assigned to NATO in Turkey.

Harry called me in to work on this with him, and the two of us sat at opposite sides of his desk, each writing on yellow pads as fast as we could.

The first option we presented was "No further U.S. response": in effect calling it "even," missiles destroyed in Turkey for missiles destroyed in Cuba, seeking to end hostilities there. We took some pride, I recall, in beginning with that, since we felt that few advisors in that era would have had the nerve even to include that as a policy option.

Along with the next one, to hit the single plane or missile site from which the Soviet attack had been launched, we thought these two options (the first being very unlikely to be adopted) were actually best, the two least likely to spur further escalations. But we weren't asked for recommendations, only for a range of alternatives.

The rest, all likely to be preferred by the JCS to these, followed fairly obviously. In ascending order: retaliate against one Soviet IRBM sites, or more than one. Or (especially if

the Soviets had also attacked some of our bomber bases in Turkey) against several Soviet air bases in the region. If US aircraft were used for any of these, rather than ballistic or cruise missile, the JCS would demand attacks as well on the SAMs and air defenses in the area.

If there was a Soviet response—or, as the JCS undoubtedly would have recommended, even without it—the US could attack all the bases, missile sites and defenses in the region. Or even—Generals Power and LeMay could be counted on to recommend this—full-scale attack on the Soviet Union.

That was, after all, what Eisenhower's plan for general war—SIOP 62, operational until recently—called for in these circumstances, conflict between armed forces of the Soviet Union and the U.S. (counting the Turkish missiles as U.S., since we controlled the warheads, though not the vehicles). To be sure, Kennedy guidance (which I'd drafted) changed that. Yet it was pretty much what NATO policy documents had always prescribed: an attack on one, Turkey, was an attack on all, to be responded to as if it were an attack on the US directly.

And NATO planners and heads of state still rejected any notion of waging a war in Europe that treated the superpower homelands as sanctuaries. They still regarded deterrence of a Soviet attack on any part of West Europe as resting on an almost-immediate launching of a full US attack on the Soviet Union in response. (Only days earlier, after all, President Kennedy had promised “full retaliation against the Soviet Union” as the response to a *single* IRBM fired from Cuba against the U.S. or anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere.)

Years later, in an oral history interview, Ted Sorensen recalled: "I remember very clearly when we brought in former Secretary of State Dean Acheson to talk to our group, expert on the Russians, expert on the Cold War, and he recommended the air strike. And someone said, "Mr. Secretary, if we bomb these Soviet missiles in Cuba, what will their reaction be?" And he said, "I know the Soviets very well," he said, "they will feel compelled to bomb NATO missile bases in Turkey." And somebody else said, "And then what would we do?" "Oh," he said, "under our NATO covenants, we would obligated to bomb Soviet missile bases inside the Soviet Union." "Oh, and then what will the Soviets do?" "Well," he said, "by that time we hope cooler heads will prevail and people will talk." There was a real chill in that room."

<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-10/sorensen2.html>

On the other hand, NATO planning and policy-making had never contemplated circumstances exactly like the premise of our draft options: armed hostilities *initiated by the US* against Soviet forces inside the territory of a Soviet ally. Some restraint in responding to a limited Soviet retaliation to that might seem in order. But not in the eyes of SAC, or USAF, or the JCS. Or in theory, our NATO allies, starting with Turkey.

LeMay, in fact, would be sure to point out that if there were ever to be an occasion to disarm the Soviet Union—before they finally built up their missile forces to the scale SAC had been predicting for years—the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was that time, perhaps the last. A Soviet attack on a NATO ally—no matter what the provocation, or the views of our



European allies—would be an irresistible occasion for it, in the eyes of SAC and LeMay, perhaps all of the Chiefs.

But Harry and I weren't very worried that any of our options would come to pass, even the precursor to them, a Soviet attack on Turkey. I believed it very unlikely that the Soviets would risk hitting our missiles in Turkey even if we did attack theirs in Cuba. (On that point, though I didn't know it at the time, I was for once in agreement with Curtis LeMay.) We couldn't understand why Kennedy thought otherwise.

Why did he seem actually sure (as the word came down to us) that the Soviets would respond to an attack on their missiles in Cuba, if it came to that, by armed moves against Turkey or Berlin? We wondered if—after his campaigning in 1960 against a supposed “missile gap”—he had never really absorbed what the strategic balance really was, or its implications.

In the fall of 1962 the U.S. had several hundred intercontinental, intermediate-range and sub-launched warheads and three thousand bombers within range of the Soviet Union. On the other side, the Soviets had at that time about *ten* operational ICBM's within range of the United States<sup>4</sup> aside from the highly vulnerable missiles on Cuba, and about a hundred and fifty to a hundred and ninety intercontinental bombers.

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<sup>4</sup> As I was told then, confidentially; later estimates have put it at forty, although there seems to remain uncertainty about just how many of the sixty-odd second-generation ICBMs then under construction in the Soviet Union were really operational by October.

As I saw it, and I presumed he did, Khrushchev was just as outgunned in strategic nuclear forces as he was, obviously, in conventional terms in the Caribbean. As I said earlier, that meant to me that he *had* to back down. The long, secret letter from him that I'd read the night before told me that he understood that. What some others in the ExComm (it came out later) had read as panicky on his part (Dean Acheson described it in print as "hysterical") I saw as sober and realistic. Khrushchev had his feet on the ground, and he knew when a gamble had failed. [QUOTE LETTER]

[EDIT: REPETITION] Ever since Wednesday morning—when contrary to his threats on Tuesday Khrushchev chose not to challenge the blockade line--I hadn't believed it would be necessary to carry out an air strike in order to get rid of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Neither did Harry. I still didn't as we worked together on Saturday to take account of that possibility.

Nor did I believe it was necessary even to consider Walter Lippman's suggestion Thursday morning of trading away our missiles in Turkey, an option which (like the majority of the Excom, it turned out) I strongly opposed for reasons of NATO solidarity.

That remained my view despite the Saturday morning message that took up Lippman's proposal. Nitze relayed to us the sense from the ExComm that it represented a last-ditch bargaining move dictated by hard-liners in the Kremlin, presumably in opposition to Khrushchev's own inclination the night before to concede. Khrushchev could probably overrule that, if he remained in control. And Kennedy apparently was banking on that,

having decided rather slyly—as we heard it-- to ignore that tough demand for a trade in favor, of accepting the Friday night message, which had no mention of our missiles in Turkey, as the ruling proposal.

All this was thrown in question (though oddly, in retrospect, not to me, so far as I can recall) by the gradual confirmation, during the afternoon, that a SAC U-2 over Cuba which had been out of communication since the morning had, in fact, been shot down by a Soviet-manned SAM. [McN: “This is an escalation.”] And, on the US side, by President Kennedy’s decision not to respond: contrary to his assurances to the JCS that any shoot-down of a reconnaissance plane would lead to immediate US attacks on the attacking air defense sites and possibly more. That presidential reticence—or as some military we were working with saw it, dismaying weakness-- was explained as a desire not to derail Soviet acceptance of his latest proposal (which was sent before the attack on the U-2 had been confirmed). [QUOTE LeMay: “He’s chickened out.”]

[Two low-level planes apparently hit: one seriously. And a SAC U-2 wanders over the SU that morning, by accident (?). Reaction of McNamara—as described by Burchinal—and of Hilsman. JFK reaction: some SOB. Reaction of K (real possibility of Migs meeting US interceptors; but even if K did misinterpret, what was he going to do?) Losing control (not command). JFK commits to large reaction if another plane shot down: RFK conveys this to Dobrynin. Every expectation that K will restrain both SAMs –though JFK cancels U-2s—and AA.



But while the ExComm awaited a Kremlin response, and working groups kept working on plans for air attacks and an invasion now scheduled for two days away, a more ominous signal, in our eyes, came down to the ISA offices. Harry was given a new task, which he passed on to me. This one came straight from McNamara.

I was to draft cables to our ambassador in Turkey, Raymond Hare<sup>5</sup> and to our Ambassador to NATO, conveying a presidential decision to remove the US IRBMs from Turkey, and “replace” them with Polaris submarines assigned to NATO in the eastern Mediterranean. As I understood the purpose of these drafts, this was to alert the ambassadors to the possibility, or likelihood, that a presidential decision to this effect would presently be forthcoming.

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<sup>5</sup> Hare was the father of Paul Hare, who was a close friend of mine three years later in the Saigon Embassy, where he was a young political officer. I learn from Wikipedia that my life had intersected with that of Paul’s father’s earlier. He was a newly-arrived Ambassador to Egypt during the Suez Crisis, when I was the assistant operations officers of a Marine battalion with the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. “During his initial days in Egypt, Hare oversaw the evacuation of U.S. citizens from Egypt.” My ship, the U.S.S. Chilton, was the main recipient of the 1100 U.S. citizens who were evacuated from Alexandria. British and French planes bombed the harbor during that process—carefully avoiding our ship with the American flag—and hovered over it in droves, waiting to attack, as we departed.

The brief instructions Harry passed on were that the Turks should be told that this would protect them from being targeted by the Soviets, if the crisis escalated, and that the Polaris submarines were a better deterrent to attack on Turkey or NATO than the IRBMs, which were vulnerable and a veritable lightning rod for attack.

I was appalled. I had been given a file of previous cable exchanges with both ambassadors, on the subject of a possible missile trade—missiles being removed from both Turkey and Cuba--and I was entirely convinced by the ambassadors' judgments that this would have a devastating effect on our relations with the Turks and with other NATO governments in general.

The Turks, Hare had said in more than one cable, were proud of the possession of the IRBMs, and rather than being fearful of their targetability, they were particularly proud that these missiles put them on "the very front line" of the NATO military posture. "These are now Turkish missiles," Hare said. Indeed, "ownership" of the missiles (though not of the warheads, which the US supposedly controlled) had been formally transferred to the Turks—ironically, on the day of the president's speech, Oct. 22--which made US unilateral reclaiming of them of questionable legality. The Turks had no desire or intention of giving them up: least of all under Soviet threat.

Moreover, if the US were seen as disarming NATO of "its" weapons in the face of Soviet threats, it would appear to all of NATO that the US was sacrificing the "defense" of Europe—its deterrent posture-- in the interests of US security. It would

be understood as the precursor to a trade-off of the NATO missiles for the removal of the Soviet missiles on Cuba that threatened the continental US, even though the White House and McNamara proposed to give no hint of this possibility at this time. This “precaution” they were taking—to keep the missiles from being attacked (and secretly, to keep them from being fired by the Turks under circumstances like these)-- was itself more than a hint of that.

This would be taken by de Gaulle, and not only by him, as confirming what he had been saying for some time: that the US could not be trusted to put European interests with respect to security above its perception of its own security. Leadership of the alliance—which had always amounted to US hegemony—might be lost to de Gaulle or a combination of France and Germany, the alliance itself might begin to dissolve. And Khrushchev could take advantage of this demoralization to press hard on Berlin. [EDIT REPETITION OF THIS FROM EARLIER: NOT NECESSARY THERE.]

All this made sense to me. (Although I didn’t know it at the time, these same arguments had been pressed on Kennedy that very morning by McGeorge Bundy and others, persuading him to give up—at least for that moment—his inclination to *accept* Khrushchev’s proposal Saturday morning of a public trade).

Nevertheless, I tried to craft language that would meet McNamara’s directive to make the best case possible for the move, pretending that it was in the interest of



the Turks themselves, not just the US—this in the face of Hare’s reports that any such action would destroy their trust in the US and the alliance. Supposedly they were to be told that the substitution of invulnerable Polaris missiles in the eastern Mediterranean would make the Turks “safer” than the vulnerable Jupiters. That was absurd. There was no difference, as far as Turks were concerned, between sub-launched ballistic missiles and ICBMs in the US, of which we already had plenty, under presidential control (and restraint). Nor did missiles under the waves require an American presence on Turkish soil, which they reasonably regarded as the real commitment of the US to their defense from attack.

I was usually pretty fast at drafting language when I agreed with the thrust of the argument—that was a major part of my job, and of my talents, as a consultant from RAND in DC—but I found this agonizingly slow going. I typed lines and paragraphs, tore the paper out and threw it away, tried again. I simply didn’t believe what I was writing, and I hated doing it.

It was a bureaucrat’s job, elaborating positions that had been dictated from above, even when you strongly disagreed with them personally. That wasn’t what I had ever come to Washington from California to do. I was a RAND consultant, not an official, not an employee.

I thought of saying I simply couldn’t (or wouldn’t) do it, leaving the building if necessary—going back to California--but I put that out of my mind, because it would

have seriously embarrassed Harry Rowen with Nitze and McNamara. It was Harry who had brought me there and vouched for me. I tried to do it for him, not for them. But I wasn't getting anywhere.

I was thinking, of Kennedy and McNamara, in real anguish, "*They're blowing it.*" The president was going to take away the Turkish missiles. He was going to make the deal that Khrushchev demanded that morning. [QUOTE: I wasn't wrong in that inference. As I was drafting, he was telling Rusk—only Rusk, no other member of the ExComm, not even his brother—to alert Cordier...] He was going to snatch defeat—break-up of the NATO alliance, yielding on Berlin as well as Cuba—from the jaws of victory.

I felt sure Khrushchev was on the verge of giving way. He had to: invasion was just two days away, he couldn't let the missiles be destroyed and his troops captured. Any countermove in Europe held too great a risk of escalation. He had to back down, probably late the next day, at latest the morning after. I'd read his letter the night before. Others, later, said they had read it as panicky, hysterical. I read it as sober, facing reality. Khrushchev had his feet on the ground. I wasn't expecting any invasion or attack to take place; it wouldn't be necessary. [REPETITION]

Until this. Kennedy was backing off, disastrously, *when he didn't have to.*

At one point, Paul Nitze (who I rarely saw during this week, though I'd slept on the couch in his office the night before last) came by the desk where I was writing and asked, "How's it going?"

Uncharacteristically, I answered that query candidly: "Not so well. Slowly." I remember feeling very tired, as well as frustrated. My mind was turning slowly. Everybody was getting tired.

I said to him: "*I can't stand writing logic that **Turks** can pick apart.*" I said "Turks" with full chauvinistic overtones, and I wasn't kidding.

He said, "Well, keep at it," and walked off.

I kept at it. Half an hour later, Harry came by and put me out of my misery. He said McNamara had drafted the cables himself, impatiently. It was embarrassing. Nitze must have told him he didn't have it yet. But I was relieved. Harry said to go home, and I went back to the hotel.

I've never forgotten my thoughts as I looked at my face in the mirror above the bathroom sink in my hotel room, clutching the sink in my hands. It was half dark, lit only from the bedroom behind me. I was feeling a kind of horror. I felt I had come to being part of something shameful, a transaction that shamed my country. The words were almost aloud in my head as I looked at the mirror:



"I'm never coming back here. I'm never going to be in this position again. I had to do this, try to do this, for Harry—he was under orders, it was his job--but I'm not working for Harry any more. I'm done. I'm not coming back to this town."

I took off my clothes and fell into bed. The next morning, Sunday, I got up late. I had breakfast at the hotel and wandered into the ISA offices in the Pentagon about ten o'clock.

Everyone was celebrating, looking bemused. There'd been an announcement on the radio from Moscow an hour earlier that Khrushchev was in the process of removing the missiles from Cuba. He'd accepted Kennedy's proposal of the afternoon before. No mention of missiles in Turkey.

It was pretty much what I'd expected, before last night. I was glad to hear it, but I wasn't so surprised as the others, and I didn't feel any great jubilation. I felt relief, like everyone, but for a different reason: that McNamara's draft cables hadn't been acted on. I checked to see if they had gone out the previous night, and apparently they hadn't. Someone had held them back, saving the day, as I saw it.

The NATO ministers were meeting at that moment, and the initial reports were that they were all joyously congratulating the US for standing firm and triumphing. The Turks were especially happy, and proud.

**Postscript: Monday, October 29, 1962**

As I've said, I had believed it very unlikely that the Soviets would risk hitting our missiles in Turkey even if we did attack theirs in Cuba. Harry and I were even more confident that the chance of *nuclear* war erupting from this confrontation was extremely low. We presumed that was also the attitude of the President and his lieutenants on the Excomm.

We knew, of course, that a large part of the public, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, thought otherwise. But the basic reason for our own confidence was our awareness of the overwhelming strategic nuclear superiority of the United States. And that, we knew, was not nearly so clear to the public.

After all, Kennedy had run for election in 1960 largely on the issue of a supposed "missile gap" favoring the Soviets. When he had discovered in office, in the fall of 1961, that the real missile (and bomber) gap was grossly in favor of the U.S., he did not make a dramatic effort to inform the public of just how wrong he had been.

As a result, the public did not realize--indeed, the reality was still highly classified--how very little the Soviets actually had in the way of nuclear forces threatening the U.S. (As I've said, that was also true even of hawkish cabinet members like Douglas Dillon; and as we'll see, it was importantly true of Fidel Castro).

Facing that near-monopoly of U.S. strategic nuclear power against the Soviet Union, it was inconceivable to us that Khrushchev would initiate nuclear operations under almost any

circumstances. In that belief I had backed the blockade, and the implicit threat of an air strike. Indeed, I didn't think it would be necessary to carry out an air strike in order to get rid of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Nor did I believe it would be necessary to trade away our missiles in Turkey, an option which, like the majority of the Excom, I strongly opposed for reasons of NATO solidarity.

However, if an air strike did take place and if the Soviets did, against all odds, recklessly confront us in Europe or at sea, one thing was unequivocally clear to Rowen and me: the *U.S. should not* initiate nuclear war under any circumstances, no matter what threats it might have made.

Based on a conversation I had had with Secretary McNamara in 1961--which I had been warned afterward to keep entirely to myself--I believed that he and the President shared this view (in contrast to their public, official statements). This was a key basis for my strong sense of personal loyalty to McNamara.

What this added up to was that the Soviets seemed to us likely to back down to U.S. firm non-nuclear threats, and even if they did not, there was almost no chance that *either* side would resort to nuclear weapons.

Thus our views in 1962--without defending them here--were at least consistent with our support of the very threatening posture and active "pressures" the Excomm had chosen from



the beginning. We assumed that the Excomm members we were serving in a staff role thought much the same way.

Indeed, my notes reveal that sometime during that second week of the crisis, Harry Rowen remarked to me, "I think the Executive Committee puts the chance of nuclear war very low, though they still may *overestimate* it by ten times. They may put it at 1 in 100." I would have agreed with that. He himself, he told me, would have said the odds were "1 in 1000."

But the day after the crisis ended, on Monday, October 29, he informed me that his boss, Paul Nitze, had just told him that *he* had put the chance of some form of nuclear war, if we had struck the missiles on Cuba, as "fairly high." And his estimate of the risk, Nitze thought, was the *lowest* in the Excomm. Everyone else, he believed, put it higher.

Harry had asked him what odds he would have given. Nitze's answer was, "At least 1 in 10."

I remember vividly my reaction, that Monday, to this news from Harry. It came in two parts.

First, puzzlement: why would they put the risk that high? How could they figure that either side was that ready to go to nuclear war? I knew that Nitze, of all people, was familiar with the new intelligence estimates. Could it be that Nitze, and the others, like the public, had

not really absorbed the implications of the new intelligence, or that they didn't fully believe it?

Second, slightly delayed: "*One in ten?! The chance of nuclear war! ...And we were doing what we were doing?!*"

What the U.S. had been doing, on recommendations of the Excomm, included:

- (1) the blockade itself, at the risk of armed conflict with Soviet warships;
- (2) forcing Soviet submarines to surface;
- (3) U-2 and low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba;
- (4) a large-scale airborne alert with significant risk of accidents involving nuclear weapons;
- (5) continuing reconnaissance, even after several planes were fired on and one shot down on Saturday;
- 6) full preparations--if they were wholly a bluff, they fooled us--for invasion and airstrike;
- ...(to which could be added, as I learned two years later,
- (7) Robert Kennedy's official 48-hour ultimatum on Saturday night and the warning he delivered that if a second recon plane were shot down the airstrike would follow immediately.)

With the exception of the dangerous airborne alert, every one of those actions was illegal under international law, a violation of the UN Charter; more significantly, as I and all my colleagues saw it (and perhaps everyone else in the world), every one threatened at least conventional armed conflict with the Soviet Union. Yet I myself believed that the stakes in

this confrontation—the possible political loss, in global terms, if we backed down-- were quite high. I was prepared to support non-nuclear threats, willing to take some risks of conventional war. I was, in short, a Cold Warrior working for the U.S. Defense Department. My emotions Saturday night on the thought of an unnecessary trade made that clear as could be, not least to myself.

But to be willing to take a ten percent chance of nuclear war?!...In order to avoid a public trade of the Turkish missiles?

*Who were* these people I was working for? Were the civilians no better than the military? Were they all insane?

I would not have felt better if I had heard then what Ted Sorensen has been widely quoted ever since as describing the president's own odds during the crisis that it would end in general nuclear war :

"Somewhere between one out of three and even."